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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000991

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SUBJECT: KUWAITI MP SAYS WOMEN WILL VOTE, ARTICLE 98 TO PASS, LEBANON'S HEZBOLLAH IN TROUBLE

REF: KUWAIT 944

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: Kuwaiti MP Mohammed Jassem Al-Sagr, chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, expressed his tempered optimism that the National Assembly will approve the GOK's bill allowing women's suffrage. He added, however, that the GOK is nervous to pressure undecided MPs. Al-Sagr also predicted that Article 98 will pass out of his committee during a vote on March 12. On Lebanon, Al-Sagr said that the death of Rafiq Hariri served as the greatest blow to Hezbollah Secretary-General Nasrallah as Hariri had lobbied the international community discreetly to keep the terrorist moniker off the militia cum political party. Al-Sagr also shared his support for the GOK's forgiveness of outstanding Iraq debt. End summary.

Women Will Gain Vote by Narrow Margin

12. (C) Al-Sagr, a staunch supporter of Kuwaiti women's right to vote (reftel), stated during a visit March 9 meeting with the Ambassador that a bill granting voting rights "will pass, maybe by a couple of votes, but it will pass." If the GOK were more aggressive in its efforts, he added, the bill could pass by ten votes. Al-Sagr lamented that the GOK is hesitant to pressure eight to ten undeclared MPs whose seats the Islamists could win in the next elections if the MPs are viewed as vocal women's rights proponents. The draft bill will fail "unanimously" when the Interior and Defense Committee, which is "full of Bedouins and Islamists," votes on the matter, but that should not affect its chances before a full Assembly vote, according to Al-Sagr. (Note: Parliamentary committees only play a consultative role; the fate of any legislation lies with the full Assembly. End note.)

13. (C) When Ambassador asked about a timeline, Al-Sagr did not have a definitive answer but warned that the longer the vote takes, the more time the Islamists will have for their counter-campaign. Al-Sagr said the vote should happen within three to six weeks, just in time for the proposed visit by Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Sabah to Washington. If the bill fails, Al-Sagr said "I don't think (the PM) can go if he doesn't get the vote." He also urged the Embassy to maintain a low profile on the subject as the U.S. position is widely known, and Islamists would portray U.S. support as interference.

Article 98 Closer to Ratification

14. (C) Article 98 remains with Al-Sagr's Foreign Affairs Committee, which is to vote on it March 12 as long as there are no surprises. He will not place the item on the Committee's agenda in advance for fear of Islamist rebuke. Al-Sagr added: "If I see a problem, I will pull it, but so far so good." The full Assembly will need to ratify Article 98 following Committee action.

Hezbollah in Precarious Position

15. (C) According to the MP, the greatest loser after Rafiq Hariri's death is Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah whom Al-Sagr described as charismatic and smart. According to Al-Sagr, Hariri quietly lobbied the international community to avoid labeling Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. With Hariri gone, Hezbollah is in need of Syria, one of its two patron countries, now more than ever. Should UN resolution 1559 be implemented, Al-Sagr added, not only would Syrian forces withdraw from Lebanon, but Hezbollah would also be forced to disarm its militia. It could just become a political force post-disarmament, but "they do not think in those terms," he said. Al-Sagr was planning to travel to Damascus to meet Syrian President Bashar Al-Asad, whom Al-Sagr believes is controlled by the "old guard," but has canceled his trip. If the Syrians fail to withdraw all of their forces from Lebanon, he predicted the Syrian regime would collapse with or without Al-Asad. As for the Lebanese, they are smart people who have had enough of wars, he added. The big question, however, is whether Syria will cause problems in

Lebanon.

Time to Forgive Iraqi Debt

16. (C) Al-Sagr believes the GOK must deal with the new Iraq. Saddam is gone; the Iraq people are in control. It is now time to forgive outstanding funds that Iraq. His committee will take up the matter when the Government proposes it. Al-Sagr also mentioned that he was upset that Ayatollah Sistani's candidate, Ibrahim Jaafari, won January's Iraqi elections as he is influenced by Iran. Al-Sagr would have preferred current Prime Minister Iyad Allawi.

LEBARON